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ABSTRACT

Most African Americans in urban areas are trapped in schools that are below the national norms for reading, mathematics, or both. These young people are not only shut off from written information about their own cultural heritage, but they also are least likely to learn much about others. The majority of African Americans in the United States are concentrated in major urban areas like Detroit, but this is true for only a small percentage of the overall white population. Therefore, whites are less adversely affected by the poor school systems in urban areas. Of all African American elementary school students in the eight urban areas studied for this report, 74% are in schools that are below norm on reading, mathematics, or both. Furthermore, depending on which set of norms is used and how that data is interpreted, scores can be manipulated to appear better than they are. Thus, parents and policymakers are being misled about the education of African American students and, thus, are not taking the problem as seriously as it should be taken. For African Americans it is now a matter of life and death that immediate steps be taken to improve the way in which children learn to read and to do mathematics. Three tables and seven references are included. (JS)

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WHAT'S IN A NORM?

How African Americans Score on Achievement Tests

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Research Notes on Education

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No. 3 July 1989

What's in a Norm?

How African Americans Score on Achievement Tests

Most African Americans in urban areas are trapped in schools that are below the national norms for reading, mathematics or both. These young people are not only shut off from written information about their own cultural heritage, but they also are least likely to learn much about others. They will become adults who know very little unless they receive it secondhand: filtered, summarized and perhaps tainted with all the biases or political and social agendas of those who are passing on the information. They will be victims of an information flow controlled by others.

Table 1 shows that in some areas of the U.S., such as Baltimore, Rochester and Prince George's County (a large suburb of Washington, D.C.), most African Americans are in schools that are above norm in both reading and mathematics. In other areas, an extremely large percentage of the African American population attends below-norm schools. This is true of Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, New Orleans and others.

In some instances, such as in Detroit and Indianapolis, public schools are equally poor for both African Americans and Whites. For example, 83 of the 157 schools in Detroit (53 percent) are below the norm on two indicators. On the whole, they are 19 points below the norm of 50 in reading and 30 points below in mathematics. Combining schools below the norm on two indicators and those below on one indicator, 80 percent of all African-American students, 63 percent of Hispanics and 72 percent of Whites are subjected to these types of learning environments.

The apparent equality of impact on each group in these schools is misleading. The majority of African-Americans in the United States is concentrated in major urban areas like Detroit, but this is true for only a small percentage of the overall White population. Therefore, Whites are less adversely affected by these types of schools. It is easy to see why some would call public schools academically genocidal to African Americans.

The percentages for each racial/ethnic group are informative by themselves, but they are only part of the picture. The whole numbers behind them are more dramatic, and Table 2 shows the real scope of the tragedy: 74 percent of all African American elementary school students in the eight urban areas studied are in schools that are below norm on reading, mathematics or both.

The sample in Table 3 for Detroit shows how the below/above norm data for each of the other districts were derived for this report.

Limitations

A few words of explanation and caution about interpreting the data are important to consider at this point.

First, norms do not represent the highest levels of excellence. Excellence is better defined in relationship to those who are nearest to the extreme above the norm. By definition, only 50 percent of any group can be above the norm, and only a small portion of that 50 percent can achieve excellence.

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Table 1

Elementary Schools Below and Above National Norms

(Test Data at Exit Grades, Enrollment for Entire School, 1988-1989)

	Number of Schools	Points Below(-) & Above(+) Norm READ	MATH	Percent AfAm	Hisp	White	Other
A: Districts Reporting Percentile Ranks							
Baltimore, MD (CAT-Form C, 1977 Norms; Grade 5)							
Below norm on two indicators	7	-9	-4	6	1	1	1
Below norm on one indicator	29	-8	8	29	29	15	29
Above norm on both indicators	84	11	20	65	70	84	70
Total	120			100	100	100	100
Prince George's County, MD (CAT-C, 1977; Grade 5)							
Below norm on two indicators	8	-12	-4	8		4	
Below norm on one indicator	20	-5	10	20		12	
Above norm on both indicators	85	12	23	72		84	
Total	113			100		100	
Detroit, MI (CAT-E, 1985; Grade 5)							
Below norm on two indicators	83	-19	-30	59	32	37	47
Below norm on one indicator	39	-11	8	21	31	35	27
Above norm on both indicators	35	11	20	20	37	28	26
Total	157			100	100	100	100
Indianapolis, IN (CAT-E, 1985; Grade 6)							
Below norm on two indicators	35	-11	-12	52		51	
Below norm on one indicator	18	-5	5	27		26	
Above norm on both indicators	15	10	14	21		23	
Total	68			100		100	
Rochester, NY (CAT-E, 1985; Grade 6)							
Below norm on two indicators	1	-16	-1	5	5	2	2
Below norm on one indicator	15	-7	16	53	59	31	57
Above norm on both indicators	18	13	29	42	36	67	41
Total	34			100	100	100	100
New Orleans, LA (CAT-F, 1985; Grades 6 & 4)							
Below norm on two indicators	59	-21	-20	84		22	
Below norm on one indicator	7	-6	-5	6		28	
Above norm on both indicators	12	14	15	10		50	
Total	78			100		100	
B: Districts Reporting Grade Equivalents							
Chicago, IL (ITBS-7, 1978; Grades 6, et al.)							
Below norm on two indicators	253	-.9	-.5	70	53	31	25
Below norm on one indicator	96	-.4	.2	18	31	19	21
Above norm on both indicators	111	.6	.7	12	16	50	54
Total	460			100	100	100	100
Houston, TX (MAT-6, 1985; Grade 5)							
Below norm on two indicators	25	-1.1	-3	20	11	3	
Below norm on one indicator	88	-.6	.7	55	64	29	
Above norm on both indicators	51	1	.2	25	25	68	
Total	164			100	100	100	

TEST DATA were for the exit grades at each school in each district. Chicago includes a few at grades 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, & 8.
TEST NAMES: California Achievement Test, the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, and the Metropolitan Achievement Test..

(Source: Computations by the Institute for Independent Education of test and enrollment data from each school district.)

Second, the purpose of these tables is to show how each State stands in relation to the national norm it has chosen for itself.

The data also show the relative positions of the various school districts. However, precise measurement of those academic differences are not possible from these data. Because norms are different for each type of test, and even for different forms of the same test, it is improper to make comparisons directly. For example, we cannot say that 19 points below norm on reading in Detroit is two points better than 21 points below norm on reading in New Orleans. Nor can we directly compare 19 points below in reading and 30 points below in mathematics, even for the same students in the same school, because of differences in the way the two tests are constructed.

Furthermore, the older 1977 norms will make students appear to have much higher achievement levels than the newer 1985 norms. Much has changed in education during those intervening eight years, and new norms probably would place Baltimore and P.G. County in a less favorable position.

Third, the below/above norm data in Table 1 are derived from median (or mid-point) data for each school. This means that half the students in each school are above the median, while half are below. Baltimore is the only district in this table that reports the average for each school rather than the median. This is an acceptable method, as long as the extreme highs and extreme lows do not unduly distort the picture.

Fourth, Most of the data are for Grade 6, but some are for the next highest elementary grade for which data are available.

Fifth, most schools in Table 1 report data in median percentile ranks, for which the norm is always a score of 50.

Houston and Chicago report in median grade equivalents, the norm for which may differ depending on local conditions. Table 1 reflects all such necessary adjustments. Thus, at 25 schools in Houston, the median for students in reading is one year and one month below norm, while at 51 schools, the medians are one year above for reading and two months above for mathematics.

Sixth, the urban areas were not chosen randomly. They are located in States known to have significant populations of African Americans and which voluntarily provided data to the Institute. They were further selected for their geographic distribution, as well as for areas subject to court-ordered busing and those with no busing.

Table 2

African Americans Enrolled at Elementary Schools in Eight Urban Districts, 1988-1989

(Schools Ranked Above and Below Norm in Reading and Mathematics at Exit Grades)

Urban Areas	Below on Two Indicators	Below on One Indicator	Above onTwo Indicators	Total
Detroit	43,980	15,416	14,827	74,223
Houston	8,273	23,076	10,434	41,783
New Orleans	33,954	2,264	4,092	40,310
Rochester	443	5,086	4,052	9,581
PG County	2,888	6,765	24,759	34,412
Indianapolis	7,621	3,962	3,113	14,696
Chicago	124,095	31,159	21,255	176,509
Baltimore	2,969	14,234	32,230	49,433
Totals	224,223	101,962	114,762	440,947
Percent	51	23	26	100

Source: Computations by the Institute for Independent Education of test and enrollment data from each school district.

Related Findings and Recommendations

Questionable Norms. While percentile ranks are not directly comparable across tests, the detailed data on each urban area shows a consistent pattern in which reading scores appear to be significantly lower in relation to the norm for reading than mathematics scores are in relation to the norm for mathematics. This confirms two views about test norms that have been discussed widely in the media.

One is that contemporary instruction in mathematics concentrates on lower level skills such as computation, rather than higher-order thinking skills. The latter types of mathematical problems must, of necessity, require the ability to understand complex concepts in textbooks and sophisticated word problems in tests. If a student scores low on reading and high on mathematics, those mathematical problems obviously do not invoke higher-order skills.

It may be that African-American parents in some areas of the country are being led to believe that their children are doing well in mathematics because many individual schools seem to be "above norm." Parents may not be aware that if the reading scores are accurate indicators, then the mathematics scores have little meaning, and vice versa. Public elementary schools, therefore, are participating in a massive program of deception

Table 3

Elementary Schools Below and Above Norm
Detroit, Michigan

(California Achievement Test, Form E, 1988, Grade 5, Norm = 50)

I: SCHOOLS BELOW NORM ON TWO INDICATORS

SCHOOL	READ PR	READ Var	MATH PR	MATH Var	ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS AfAm	His	Whi	Oth	Tot
COUZENS	17	-33	25	-25	264		15	2	281
MCMILLAN	19	-31	20	-30	171	57	114	4	346
CRARY	19	-31	24	-26	775		3		778
BELLEVUE	20	-30	28	-22	317		4		321
NOBLE	21	-29	28	-22	946		1	1	948
CLINTON	21	-29	31	-19	572		2		574
HARDING ELEM	22	-28	16	-34	832	3	174	4	1,013
FITZGERALD	22	-28	35	-15	877		3		880
GREENFIELD PE	22	-28	35	-15	575	3	40	6	624
ROSNER	22	-28	36	-14	569		4		573
MCFARLANE	23	-27	42	-8	592	1	4	1	598
COOPER	23	-27	23	-27	645	7	37	16	705
HOWE	23	-27	48	-2	395		4	1	400
GARDNER	24	-26	23	-27	253	12	151	5	421
ROSE	24	-26	40	-10	351	1	6		358
COURVILLE	25	-25	39	-11	897	3	10	2	912
WHITE	25	-25	41	-9	767	4	177	18	966
CARSTENS	25	-25	28	-22	651	1	6		658
IVES	25	-25	45	-5	284	1	1		286
MARQUETTE	25	-25	39	-11	545	1	88	4	638
WAYNE	25	-25	29	-21	692	2	35	2	731
ANGELL	26	-24	25	-25	350	3	7		360
EMERSON ELEM	26	-24	41	-9	573		7	1	581
ROOSEVELT	26	-24	24	-26	425		1		426
GOODALE	26	-24	48	-10	1,099		11	1	1,111
NEWTON	27	-23	41	-9	676	1	7		684
MARSHALL	27	-23	44	-6	949	1	11	4	965
CARLETON	27	-23	33	-17	528	1	260	7	796
CLARK	27	-23	40	-10	817	2	48	1	868
WILLIAMS	28	-22	29	-21	377		3	8	388
MACDOWELL	28	-22	36	-14	634		1	2	637
HUTCHINSON	28	-22	49	-1	554	1	3		558
MCGREGOR	28	-22	37	-13	223	1	246	8	478
CAMPBELL	29	-21	40	-10	380		3	2	385
LODGE	29	e21	46	-4	149	3	72		224
GLAZER	29	-21	38	-12	354				354
SCRIPPS	29	-21	38	-12	488		23		511
BIDDLE	30	-20	30	-20	326				326
COOLIDGE	30	-20	39	-11	797	2	6	3	808
DOSSIN	30	-20	25	-25	521		2		523
YOST	30	-20	21	-29	212		60	1	273
FLEMMING	30	-20	48	-2	572	2	106	110	790
HANNEMAN	31	-19	41	-9	281	77	107	7	472
HARMS	31	-19	38	-12	82	92	238	11	423
HOLMES AL	31	-19	46	-4	653		7	1	661
HANSTEIN	31	-19	47	-3	270		52	2	324
VETAL ELEM	32	-18	39	-11	554		28		582
WINSHIP ELEM	32	-18	37	-13	302		2	2	306
VERNOR	32	-18	36	-14	409			2	411
KROLIK	32	-18	48	-2	257		1		258
HUBERT	33	-17	45	-5	288	2	236	2	528
MASON	33	-17	49	-1	886	1	22	2	911
MARK TWAIN	34	-16	37	-13	355	52	151	3	561
BREITMEYER	34	-16	44	-6	392	0	2		394
GUYTON	34	-16	46	-4	571		17	1	589
STARK	35	-15	22	-28	562	1	8	1	572
BOW	36	-14	38	-12	733		7		740
SCHULZE	36	-14	47	-3	491		1		492
KEITH	36	-14	43	-7	618		4		622
PATTENGILL	37	-13	47	-3	554		1		555
HAMPTON ELEM	37	-13	40	-10	584	1	8		593
TAPPAN ELEM	38	-12	46	-4	611		3	1	615
LAW	38	-12	42	-8	508	1	74	20	603
BOW	39	-11	41	-9	401		7	2	410
LARNED	39	-11	49	-1	157		93	3	253
WILKINS	39	-11	30	-20	812	2	52	95	961
MACOMB	39	-11	42	-8	566		14		580
THIRKELL	40	-10	41	-9	420		1	1	422
BURNS	40	-10	22	-28	865		1	1	867
PITCHER	40	-10	36	-14	630		9		639
KEIDAN	40	-10	35	-15	740				740
PARKMAN	41	-9	48	-2	497	2	10	1	510
ROBINSON ELEM	42	-8	41	-9	900		63	13	976
SPAIN ELM	43	-7	48	-2	532		12	1	545
COOKE	43	-7	41	-9	695		33	2	730
BIRNEY	43	-7	45	-5	410		1	1	412
ILENE	43	-7	44	-6	297				297
PECK	43	-7	47	-3	346		1		347
MCKENNY	44	-6	38	-12	671	1	29	1	702
FORD ELEM	45	-5	35	-15	570		6	2	578
EDISON	45	-5	38	-12	578		3		581
BOMPERS	45	-5	26	-24	194	2	140	9	345
STELLWAGEN	46	-4	36	-14	764	3	30		797
(83 schools)									
MEAN	31	-19	37	-13					
SUBTOTAL					43,980	350	3,230	401	47,961
PERCENT					59	18	37	47	56

II: SCHOOLS BELOW NORM ON ONE INDICATOR

SCHOOL	READ PR	READ Var	MATH PR	MATH Var	ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS AfAm	His	Whi	Oth	Tot
DAVISON	21	-29	54	4	526		25	33	584
STEWART	23	-27	52	2	420				420
SHERRILL	24	-26	50	0	505	1	3	1	510
BENNETT	27	-23	53	3	141	144	291	10	586
STEPHENS	27	-23	77	27	400		8	1	409
PASTEUR	29	-21	55	5	507		1		508
CUSTER	30	-20	52	2	824		3		827
DOTY	30	-20	55	5	291		1	1	293
FERRY	32	-18	68	18	484	4	45	2	535
CHRYSLER	33	-17	53	3	226	2	6		234
HOUGHTEN	33	-17	68	18	257	5	218	10	490
BAGLEY	34	-16	60	10	728		4	1	733
HOLCOMB	35	-15	51	1	835	3	60	3	901
KING ELEM	35	-15	71	21	666		2	1	669
BUNCHE	37	-13	50	0	246	1	9		256
CARVER	37	-13	55	5	268	18	366	8	660
LYNCH	38	-12	54	4	349		4	1	354
BURT	39	-11	80	30	675	2	42		719
FAIRBANKS	39	-11	51	1	211				211
TRIX	39	-11	54	4	392	1	149	23	565
HERMAN	41	-9	57	7	524	1	28	3	556
BEARD	42	-8	61	11	17	25		11	53
EDMONSON	42	-8	51	1	354	1	25	12	392
OWEN	42	-8	59	9	255	33	132	4	424
GRAYLING	42	-8	55	5	274	5	263		542
JOYCE	42	-8	67	17	424		1		425
CLIPPERT	43	-7	51	1	327	49	158	7	541
PRIEST	43	-7	55	5	322	107	387	24	840
MCLEAN	43	-7	76	26	99		51		150
WEATHERBY	43	-7	74	24	257	1	28		286
PULASKI	43	-7	53	3	678	1	225	31	935
HIGGINS	46	-4	62	12	125	44	211	6	386
KOSCIUSKO	47	-3	58	8	229	10	133	3	375
MCGRAW	47	-3	66	16	231	43	28	6	308
VAN ZILE	47	-3	70	20	694	8	36	4	742
MONNIER	48	-2	51	1	542	1	2		545
LOVING	50	0	41	-9	464				484
WEBSTER	59	9	46	-4	195	209	60	23	487
SANDERS	63	13	44	-6	454	1	3	3	461
(39 schools)									
MEAN	39	-11	58	8					
SUBTOTAL					15,416	720	3,008	232	19,376
PERCENT					21	37	35	27	23

III: SCHOOLS ABOVE NORM ON BOTH INDICATORS

SCHOOL	READ PR	READ Var	MATH PR	MATH Var	ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS AfAm	His	Whi	Oth	Tot
YOUNG ELEM	50	0	66	16	862	3	4	1	870
BERRY	50	0	61	11	266				266
BURTON INTNL	51	1	61	11	361	2	106	83	552
COURTIS	51	1	68	18	747		2		749
PARKER	51	1	78	28	867	1	3	1	872
BRADY	51	1	60	10	485		1	1	487
LYNCH ANNEX	51	1	63	13	425		14		439
HEALY	52	2	69	19	170	1	31	3	205
HOLMES ON	53	3	67	17	170	63	324	10	567
NEWBERRY	53	3	55	5	274	88	141	9	512
WOODWARD	53	3	91	41	494		1	1	496
GREENFIELD UN	53	3	58	8	266	1	434	3	704
DIXON	54	4	59	9	607	2	162	2	773
JONES	55	5	80	30	534			1	535
MAYBURY	56	6	55	5	88	216	116	12	432
MCCOLL	56	6	63	13	416	2	32		450
MACCULLOCH	57	7	50	0	684		4		688
JEFFRIES	58	8	55	5	232	27	153	5	417
LOGAN	59	9	76	26	176	94	308	16	594
ATKINSON	59	9	51	1	549		15	2	566
REIMAN	61	11	70	20	137	201	203	16	557
MCKINSTRY	62	12	69	19	116	112	85	7	320
SAMPSON	62	12	53	3	296	27	74	10	407
CHANDLER	62	12	84	34	539		2		541
GRANT ELEM	62	12	73	23	714	1	83	19	817
MARSH	63	13	59	9	217		1	1	219
MANN	65	15	64	14	491		11	1	503
BELL	65	15	80	30	249			1	250
GOLIGHTLY	66	16	88	38	480	7	74	18	579
JAMIESON	69	19	80	30	485		1		486
NICHOLS	76	26	91	41	562	1	6		569
BARTON	79	29	94	44	543				543
VANDENBURG	79	29	87	37	430				430
BATES	89	39	90	40	439	3	33	4	479
DUFFIELD	95	45	99	49	476		5		481
(35 schools)									
MEAN	61	11	78	28					
SUBTOTAL					14,827	852	2,429	227	18,335
PERCENT					20	44	28	26	21
TOTAL					74,223	1,922	8,667	860	85,672
PERCENT					100	100	100	100	100

that directly affects African-American students and their families.

Another view is that standardized tests are misleading indicators of achievement because the accuracy of the norms is questionable. As an independent researcher, John Jacob Cannell, points out in his study, "...no state scores below the publisher's 'national norm' at the elementary level on any of the six major nationally normed, commercially available tests." He continues, that these tests "...allow 90 percent of the school districts in the United States to be above average." Cannell points out that school districts are in fact worse off than reports show because of faulty norms.

If this is so, then many African-American students are completely off the bottom of the scale.

As a recent report by leading African-American scholars points out, "testing becomes a dangerous instrument of social oppression when test results are seen as revealing native abilities uninfluenced by environmental conditions" (Joint Center for Political Studies, 1989). They call for tests to "become more sophisticated and sensitive tools for measurement and diagnosis."

Cultural Context. The school, rather than individuals scattered across the district, may be the most important factor to monitor, because the school is the child's learning environment. The performance of the group within that environment can promote or retard individual achievement and motivation. For African-Americans, because of their unique African heritage, the group in some ways may be traditionally more important than the individual (Mudimbe, 1988; Mukenge, 1988).

An Invisible People. States often report statewide data, in which data from schools serving African Americans are made statistically invisible by data about the majority population. Districts also report how many individual students in a district are above norm, but since the top students in effect are gathered from all the schools and placed at the top of the scale, the impact at the local level is not seen. For example, it does not show how clusters of African Americans in their own neighborhoods are being affected. Very enlightened parents and the media really must probe to find out where each school stands.

African-American Models. In areas where there is no court-ordered busing, which causes large numbers of students to be transported across the city, African Americans still can look within their own communities for standards of excellence and effective teaching methodology.

The Institute for Independent Education found in its study of test scores in Washington, D.C., a predominantly African-American city, that schools could be sorted effectively by zip codes, which are more authentic boundaries for real communities than are zones created by school boards (Institute Report No. 1). Within each zip code, there are schools in which students perform well above the norm. The Institute suggests that teachers, principals and students in those schools could be models for schools that are below norm in those same neighborhoods.

Another report by the Institute also reinforces the notion that African Americans can look amongst themselves for models of high achievement in schools (Institute Report No. 4). In Chicago, there are high test scores in reading and mathematics at some magnet schools in which most of the students are African Americans and large numbers are from low-income families.

Reading Research. The reading scores in the eight urban areas encompassed by this study demonstrate the seriousness of the need for improved reading instruction. Whatever many public schools are doing to teach African-American students how to read clearly is not working, and their programs need to be revamped.

As a first step to correct this situation, there is a need for research to determine if reading as it is taught to African Americans in places like Prince George's County, which has the greatest percentage of its population reading well above norm, is taught any differently than in places like New Orleans, which has the greatest percentage of its students reading well below norm.

Education researchers also need to determine if the academic and ethnographic profiles of successful students and their teachers are any different from profiles of unsuccessful students and their teachers.

Literacy Programs. Many urban areas are also focusing on adult literacy programs, all of which are needed to increase the self-esteem, educational levels and economic productivity of large numbers of Americans. They are also needed because parents who are literate tend to encourage their children to be literate. Yet, it is at least of equal, if not greater, importance to be concerned about illiteracy in our schools. We must stop our academic machinery from churning out an endless stream of graduates who are seriously deficient in reading skills, because they are undoing all the work accomplished by adult literacy programs.

African-American individuals, community organizations and churches concerned about adult literacy might well be inspired by the story of

"moonlight schools" which were developed by illiterate mountain people in Kentucky in 1911 (Stewart, 1922). Their idea for quickly teaching people how to read and write soon spread across the country, supported by the needs of the Army during World War I. The first moonlight school for African Americans began at Camp Lee in Virginia, and others soon followed.

It has been proven time and again ever since then that people can be taught very quickly how to read. African-American ndependent neighborhood schools, located in most urban areas across the country, do it all the time. They teach some of the same children that public schools have discarded as uneducable, and teach them right along with very advanced children from the African-American community.

For African Americans it is now a matter of life and death that immediate steps be taken to improve the way in which children learn to read and to do mathematics, and those steps indeed may be quite different from popular strategies or fads that may be promoted from time to time for mainstream America.

It is also vital that African-American children develop the skills that will enable them to explore subtleties in written information on their own, without summarized intervention by others, and begin to shape their own future in the world.

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